

## Beauty and Sadness

*Y.Kawabata*

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Kawabata supposedly wanted to become an artist but writing took overhand, maybe as a default. This sensitivity and temperament that comes with it is very much present in this slim book. It is an artistic temperament and sensitivity that strikes the Westerner as very Japanese. I recall during my first visit to Japan when I walked around a castle. It was all wooden and with a reassuring smell of tar as with an old ship. I was particularly struck by a pavilion that was dedicated for the gazing at the Full Moon. In the novel there is a reference to a place where you go to drink saké from a large cauldron in which the point is to have the Moon reflect in the liquid. Who but the Japanese would ever think of that? In the novel the mood is always evoked by minute descriptions of nature. How it is enwrapped in haze, how the dew form like flowers on the branches of pine trees, how the rain falls so softly that you hardly notice it, or how the hills covered with tea leaves blend in different shades of green.

The plot is somewhat melodramatic. A middle aged man in his mid-fifties is suddenly taken by an impulse to listen to the New Year bells of a Kyoto temple together with an old love, and he takes the train from Tokyo. True he has heard them many times on the radio, but now he wants to hear them on location. It transpires that when the man was in his early thirties, married and with a young wife and family, he had an affair with a sixteen year old girl. It ended badly, the young girl got pregnant, gave birth to a child who promptly died even before she had a chance to look at it. She fell into a depression and tried to kill herself. Later she recovered with the aid of the mother and moved to Kyoto where she eventually made a reputation as an artist attaining some modest fame and attention. The man himself was a novelist and wrote it all up as a novel, which he had his wife to type, ravished as she was by jealousy. The novel made a splash, nothing he ever did before and hence had the same success, nor struck the same nerve with the public, and as a consequence he profited handsomely financially, enabling him and his family to lead a comfortable life, on the proceeds of an affair which nowadays would have been condemned as a case of pedophilia and merited a prison sentence. But times has changed.

When he submits to this sudden whim, he is met by a young beautiful woman that turns out to be the student and protege of his former love. Never indifferent to female charm, after all his affair with the young teenage-girl would be followed by many more casual affairs, but just as with his books, none of them touched him in the same way, he is taken aback. It transpires that his old lover and the young woman are sexually involved and the latter decides to have her revenge on the novelist of the story by seducing him. She eventually ends up so doing, and not only that she also seduces the son, and as it appears, has him succumb to a boating accident on a lake, when he is making a short visit to Kyoto. Then the novel ends abruptly.

As a modern reader it is hard to sympathize with the child molester and his bittersweet memories of the affair. He seems to be too smug and too lucky and too callous somehow to

go beyond mere sensual pleasure. His old lover too seem very distant and remote, maybe in her way corrupting a young innocent woman. Or is she so innocent? In a sense she becomes the central character of the novel, a character whose willfulness and unpredictability usurps the stage set for others.

The enduring legacy of the reading is this particular sensitivity with which the narration is endowed and which you like to think is essentially Japanese, evoking thin paper screens, full moons, hazy hills. The paintings which are repeatedly referred to and play such an important role, evokes in the mind of the reader the traditional Japanese way of painting with no straight lines or mechanical perspectives, but with only a few deftly applied brush strokes so naturally merging into the abstract.

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